

WORK FOR GENTLEWOMEN AS ELEMENTARY SCHOOLMISTRESSES.

The work of providing schools and teachers for the education of the people is, in England, barely two hundred years old, for the children of the poor had little, if any, interest in the monastic schools of days gone by, or in the grammar schools which followed them.

To the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge belongs the honour of starting at the end of the seventeenth century with some attempt at organisation, schools for the poorest classes - for girls as well as boys - a practical method of showing belief in the principle "that all who are born men have a right to be trained to all that is human"; and also in the fact that women, however poor their station, have intellectual capabilities, and a right to be taught. The scope of these schools was undoubtedly narrow and their results poor; still their very existence tended to break up the selfish indifference of the richer classes as to the mental condition of their poorer brethren. There seems to have been a difficulty in supplying teachers for these first elementary schools, although the standard of requirements was by no means high. For mistresses, writing and arithmetic were non-essentials; it was enough if they could read, do needlework, and had some knowledge of the Scriptures. It was fully a century before the training of teachers was considered necessary. In the meantime the care of the children was shared by the older-established dame-schools, so vividly pictured in Shenstone's "Schoolmistress", and by the Society's schools, which were too often in the hands of teachers "who had turned to the work because all other work had turned from them". About the middle of the eighteenth century, the feeling of sympathy and responsibility which had begun to influence public opinion in the relations between rich and poor, bore fruit in the establishment of Sunday schools, which started the work of bridging over the wide gulf which had hitherto divided class from class. We hear much of the hard battle fought by the educational pioneers of this time (some of them, by the way, cultivated gentlewomen); of the terror of the farmers lest all society should be inhaled by their labourers becoming better educated than themselves; of the fashionable sneers that "the poor were fated to be ignorant and wicked" and that "to teach the lower orders to write, was to tempt them to commit forgery"; also of the prejudice and unwillingness of the people themselves. But in spite of all, the desire for elementary education was spreading, public conscience was growing clearer, and early in the present century the National Society and the British Society began to build schools all over the country, and the first infant schools were started. Now the great want

naturally showed itself. The schools might be built, the scholars assembled, but where could enough suitable teachers be found? The monitorial system was tried and failed. In 1836 the Home and Colonial College began to train teachers at first for infants only; in fifteen years' time, twenty five training colleges were in working order, and six thousand pupil-teachers were serving their apprenticeship in the art of teaching in the then numerous elementary schools...

The formation of the Education Department in 1839, marks a new era of great progress, from which dates the rapid development of the whole fabric of organised state education for the people, with its inspectors, codes, grants to schools and training colleges, compulsory attendance, and Blue Books.

Formerly it was thought that if a gentlewoman had to earn her living by teaching, it must be in a private family or ladies' school, and there are still to be found those who would consider it a loss of position to teach in an elementary school, possibly on account of the nature of the instruction given, or from the class of children taught, or from the associations connected with the words, "National Schoolmistress". Still the idea that gentlewomen can find congenial and remunerative, as well as useful work in teaching the children of the poor, is no new and untried one.

As long ago as 1872, Miss Hubbard and Sir J. Kay Shuttleworth ably and earnestly advocated this principle, chiefly on the grounds that the children themselves would derive much benefit from the gentle cultured training they would receive from constant association with well-taught, high-principled ladies, and also that the ladies themselves would be able to do more satisfactory and remunerative work in a State-paid and governed school, than they could in the uncertain and dependant capacity of private governesses. The chief advantages pointed out by Miss Hubbard still exist, and are indeed proved and emphasised by gentlewomen who have since taken up the work. The pay ranges upwards from £65 per annum in the country, or £85 under L.S.B., where a student fresh from college can begin as assistant, with the responsibility of one class only, up to £200 or even more as head mistress of a large and important school. Frequently too, in the country there is the advantage of a school house, in which one can make a pleasant home. The hours of teaching are short, usually six or seven hours daily, with leisure evenings, and generally a free Saturday and Sunday; moreover, the prospect of rising, together with a definite yearly programme of work to be done, gives hope, zest, and purpose to the daily round.

Among the disadvantages of the work, spoken of by those actually engaged in it, is the difficulty experienced by many in handling large numbers of children; for classes in large schools frequently contain fifty to sixty scholars. Having served no apprenticeship as pupil teachers, ladies have their inexperience in this art of teaching numbers to contend

with; to many it is discouraging in the extreme, and there is nothing for it but sheer determination to succeed, by getting hold of the affections and good sense of the children, and compelling their attention to interesting, well-taught lessons. The strain of this sort of work is often severely felt, also the physical discomforts arising from dirt, dinginess and poor surroundings, especially in large cities; but still above and beyond all fatigue, discouragements, loneliness, shines the steady certainty that the work needs doing, that the children do improve, if slowly, for they are being trained and educated, not "crammed" simply to pass each inspection.

And this brings us to the question, what manner of woman is likely to be successful in elementary school work, and what special qualifications and training must she possess?

In the first place, she must be truly "gentle", not "genteel"; she must be robust in health, both of body and mind, to stand the physical fatigue and anxieties that belong to the profession, especially till the ease and skill born of experience be gained. Added to this, she will need enthusiasm for the work, with an interested knowledge of matters affecting the working classes, and a humble belief in the principle that "that which acts most powerfully on the condition of a school, is the character of the teacher".

When Miss Hubbard advocated the scheme of ladies working as elementary teachers, she also advocated the founding of a training college, especially arranged and intended for women already possessing general education and culture, though lacking technical training. Bishop Otter College, Chichester, opened in 1873 "for the training of ladies as elementary schoolmistresses", was the result of her advocacy and energy. The buildings are delightfully situated between Chichester and the South Downs and every possible arrangement for the health, comfort, and well-being of the students is carefully thought out and provided for. There are very few of the two hundred or more students who have passed through the college since 1873 who do not look back upon their period of "training" as a very happy and profitable time, full of interesting associations, new ideas, and mental growth. The college course, which covers two years, is founded on the syllabus issued by the Education Department.

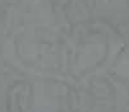
Students, who must be over eighteen, usually pass the scholarship examination in July, and enter college in the following January, as Queen's Scholars. The fees are £20 per annum. These Queen's scholars sign an agreement to reside in college two years, and afterwards to teach in elementary schools until they have gained their parchment certificates. Usually this takes two or three years. Private students, who do not sit for the scholarship, also enter in January, and generally stay two years. They pay £20 per annum, and sign no agreement.

The majority of students trained in the college, now at work at home or abroad, are earning a comfortable independence, while happy and successful in their work. Surely, then, this

employment of ladies in elementary schools may be considered a legitimate opening for the energies of earnest and capable workers, who are doing what they can towards the great end of drawing the unhappily still divided "classes" together.

Francesa Epps.

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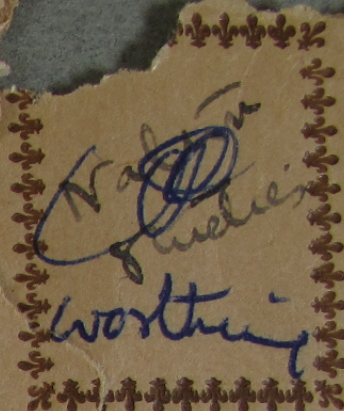
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